

INFLUX OF LONG-TAILED SKUAS IN THE NETHERLANDS IN AUTUMN 1988

INVASIE VAN KLEINSTE JAGERS IN NEDERLAND IN DE HERFST VAN 1988

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Introduction

Autumn 1988 surprised even the most experienced seawatchers with the appearance of Long-tailed Skuas *Stercorarius longicaudus* in numbers, unprecedented in the Netherlands as well as anywhere else in Northwestern Europe in this century. In the Netherlands most birds were seen along the North Sea coast during the second half of September and the first half of October. There were only a few inland records, mostly from the lake IJsselmeer region.

Methods

The data, presented in this paper, have been collected during seawatching by the Club van Zeetrekwaarnemers (CvZ; cf. Camphuysen & Van Dijk 1983), or were obtained by special requests for information on this species in a series of Dutch bird journals (Sula, Dutch Birding, Dutch Birding Nieuwsbrief and Het Vogeljaar). A more thorough review of the influx will shortly be presented by Van der Ham *et al.* (in prep.), in which all observers will be mentioned by name and in which all observations will be specified. For this article, all records received have been used, including those, which are, at present, insufficiently documented to meet the acceptance criteria required by the Dutch Rarities Committee (CDNA).

The occurrence in autumn 1988

After only one spring record (on May 13th an adult heading north, Camperduin, Noord-Holland), and no summer records, the first Long-tailed Skuas were reported in the last week of August (5 indivi-

duals of which 3 inland, presumably all concerning juveniles). The next observations came from the second week of September, when 2 juvenile birds appeared along the North Sea coast. Then from 17 till 21 September 9 individuals (4 adults and 6 juveniles) were reported, six of which were seen at the North Sea coast, while the other three turned up in the lake IJsselmeer region.

So far all observations had coincided with quiet weather. In the period from 24 to 29 September, however, strong westerly winds prevailed, resulting in the appearance of 28 individuals along the Dutch North Sea coast (21 adults and 7 juveniles). The coast of Noord-Holland produced 25 of these, one was seen at the Wadden Isles and two along the coast of Zuid-Holland. The best days were 24 September (9 individuals) and 29 September (7).

Between 5 and 10 October, once again during strong westerlies, the bulk of the Long-tailed Skuas was recorded. No less than 64 individuals (46 ad., 1 2nd cy and 17 juv.) were seen, all of them along the North Sea coast. On the Wadden Isles 10 birds were reported, along the Noord- and Zuid-Holland coasts 30 and 22 respectively and in Zeeland 2. After 10 October two juveniles were found dead on the Wadden Isles (15 October and 15 November) and three more live birds were observed during a westerly storm on 28/29 October, two at the Wadden Isles and one in Noord-Holland.

Thus, during autumn 1988 113 Long-tailed Skuas were observed in the Netherlands. Of these, 24 records were not or insufficiently documented and some doubts might remain as to their specific identity; 19 of these were juveniles. Four records referred to birds found dead (all of them juveniles). This number, although slightly higher than usual (cf. Camphuysen 1989), is still too low to be speaking of a wreck.

Among the 113 birds reported, 40 were identified as juveniles, one as a second calendar year bird (8 October at Westkapelle, Zeeland; Dutch Birding 11 (1):43; probably the first ever in the Netherlands) and 72 as adults. A large proportion of the adult birds could be recognized as the nominate subspecies *S. l. longicaudus*, thus locating the origin of the influx somewhere between Northern Scandinavia and Central Siberia. During the first half of the influx (late August till the third week of September) juveniles predominated, although the numbers were still comparatively low ($n = 17$). Within this period, however, during the third week of September the proportion of adults started to rise. In the second part of the influx, when most birds occurred, adults were far more common than juveniles (table 1).

Occurrence in the Netherlands prior to 1988

Prior to 1988, the largest number of Long-tailed Skuas seen in the Netherlands within a single year was 14 in 1978 (Keyl & Van der Ham in prep.). Most Long-tailed Skuas are spotted in autumn; spring records are, and always have been, much rarer. Prior to 1960 there were, on average, 0-1 records per year. This frequency of occurrence increased to a mean of 4 records per year in the period 1960-1987. Since the mid 1970s the majority of the Long-tailed Skuas observed was reported as juvenile, probably as a result of the increased understanding of the identification of immature plumaged skuas. Almost all birds were observed in autumn (between August and October), with juveniles on average turning up

table 1. Seasonal pattern and age distribution of 113 Long-tailed Skuas *Stercorarius longicaudus* observed in autumn 1988 in the Netherlands.

tabel 1. Seizoenpatroon en leeftijdsverdeling van 113 Kleinste Jagers waargenomen in het najaar van 1988 in Nederland.

month weekno.	SEPTEMBER					OCTOBER					NOVEMBER			total age
	35	36	37	38	39	40	41	42	43	44	45	46		
Adult	0	0	0	4	21	3	43	0	0	1	0	0	72	
2 cy	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	
1 cy	5	0	2	5	7	2	15	1	0	2	0	1	40	
total	5	0	2	9	28	5	59	1	0	3	0	1	113	

at the same time as adults (median passage juveniles in autumn, 1961-86: 15 Sep (n= 43), adults 10 Sep (n= 19; Keijl *in litt.*). It is clear that, compared to all earlier years on record, autumn 1988 was indeed exceptional as far as the number of Long-tailed Skuas seen in a single season is concerned. The pattern of appearance, between August and October proved to be very much the same, but adults were relatively numerous and were observed on average later in autumn

The influx elsewhere in NW Europe

The influx of Long-tailed Skuas in 1988 was not only noticed in the Netherlands. The data received so far from Great Britain (Allsopp *et al.* 1989, Dawson *et al.* 1989), Norway (A.W. Clarke *in litt.*), Sweden (E. Hirschfeld *in litt.*), Denmark (K. Malling Olsen *in litt.*), Western Germany (Limicola 2(6): 239-240) and Belgium (Van der Ham *et al.* in prep., Oriolus 54(3): 131, Oriolus 54(4): 192) as well as from the North Sea (Camphuysen & Den Ouden 1988, Bulletin North Sea Bird Club 53:2 and 54:2, Keyl *in litt.*) all showed that the number of Long-tailed Skuas in NW Europe this autumn far exceeded that known from other years. In Finland, however, no exceptional numbers were reported (M. Hario *in litt.*) and from France no data were received at all. The largest numbers were registered in Great Britain (c. 500), Denmark (c. 500) and south Sweden (c. 270) with another 150+ from south Norway, 44 from Western Germany, 20 from south Finland and 18 from Belgium. Off-shore on the North Sea at least 67 individuals were recorded during ship- and platform-based observations. This greatly exceeds the numbers usually seen in this area, both for platform-based (Blake *et al.* 1984) and for ship-based observations (Blake *et al.* 1984, Tasker *et al.* 1987).

In the North Sea area the first unusual concentrations were reported in the period 18-21 September (central and northern North Sea, Orkneys, east Scotland and south Norway), disregarding the unusual but still marginal numbers of juveniles in the Netherlands and Belgium earlier that month. On 24 and 25 September large

numbers were seen in northeast England, west Denmark, the Netherlands and the central North Sea, while the period between 27 September and 2 October produced unusual concentrations in southwest Sweden, north Denmark, northeast and east England as well as to a much lesser extent in the central North Sea. The last wave of Long-tailed Skuas was reported between 7 and 11 October from west Denmark and the Netherlands as well as from southwest Sweden, east Scotland and northeast England, although the numbers in the last three areas were already lower than those earlier in autumn. Fair numbers were also still seen in west England and west Ireland. From 12 October onwards numbers declined swiftly and the last concentration was of a mere 5 birds in the northern North Sea on 15 November.

Discussion

The Long-tailed Skua is seldom seen in numbers in Western Europe, either during spring- or autumn passage. The exact routes are largely unknown and the main passage obviously takes place out in the ocean. In recent years, each spring, hundreds of migrant Long-tailed Skuas have been seen in the Outer Hebrides. Autumn passage is largely obscure: there are no sites known with substantial numbers occurring regularly.

Summarizing the 1988 Long-tailed Skua influx, it seems clear that from late August until half September, there were already more birds present in the North Sea area than usual, the majority of them juvenile. Nevertheless, the bulk of the influx took place at the end of the second decade of September, when apparently large numbers of predominantly adult birds entered the North Sea from the north. In normal years these birds would probably have passed by west of the British Isles, but somehow this year the birds entered the North Sea area. There they first passed by Scotland and S Norway, making their way further south (and further inshore as a consequence of the rough weather) to west Denmark, northeast England and the Netherlands (24 and 25 September). The next week, observations concentrated along the English east coast and in the Skagerrak/Kattegat area. During the second week of October, the birds were concentrated along the southeastern part of the North Sea (west Denmark, the Netherlands) and to a lesser extent in east England, probably already leaving the area by either the English Channel (no French data, unfortunately), or by returning north to round Scotland and move SW from there.

In trying to explain the influx of Long-tailed Skuas, it was tried to find any proof of previous influxes. Though this species has always been a fairly rare visitor in the North Sea area, there have been occasional years producing more than the average numbers (e.g. 1976; O'Sullivan *et al.* 1977, Seitz & Von Wicht 1980). Nonetheless, an influx on the scale reported here, has not been described earlier this century. It could be that in the 19th century influxes occurring in 1879 (Nelson 1880) and in 1891 (Baxter & Rintoul 1953) were of a similar scale. In none of these cases the influx was thought to follow an exceptionally successful and productive breeding season, but strong westerlies had forced the birds to enter the North Sea (1879, 1891, 1976), or even central Europe (1976). As to the cause of the 1988 influx, many questions

remain to be answered. As yet, no exact information has been received as to the results of the breeding season in Scandinavia or the USSR, although in Finland breeding has probably been fairly succesful (M.Hario *in litt.*). However, good breeding success alone is unable to explain the influx since adults, usually extremely rare in the North Sea in autumn, predominated. It could be that the availability of food along the usual migration route was 'not as expected', forcing the birds to follow an alternative course. The lack of records of dead or starving birds indicates that most of the skuas involved in the influx must have been in a fairly good condition. There is no evidence of extremely adverse weather which might have caused the influx or weakened the birds; indeed, the onset of the influx was in fine conditions and the birds were seen foraging offshore in a frontal system off east Scotland (Camphuysen & Den Ouden 1988). As yet, not enough information has become available to make an educated guess as to the ultimate and proximate causes of this highly unusual influx of Long-tailed Skuas.

Acknowledgements

My special thanks to those who assisted and contributed to this paper. Apart from the many observers, I would like to mention the following persons by name: Marc Argeloo, Arnoud van den Berg, Kees Camphuysen, Andrew Clarke, Rob ter Ellen, Martti Hario, Paul Herroelen, Erik Hirschfeld, Guido Keijl, Klaus Malling Olsen, Gunter de Smet en Leo Stegeman.

Samenvatting In de herfst van 1988 werden in ons land 113 Kleinste Jagers waargenomen. De meeste vogels werden langs de Noordzeekust gezien, maar een aantal andere werd in het IJsselmeergebied aangetroffen. Nooit eerder in de geschiedenis werd in één seizoen een dergelijk aantal in ons land opgemerkt. Ofschoon de eerste vogels (voor zover bekend allen juvenielen) reeds eind augustus verschenen, duurde het tot de derde week van september voordat de aantallen echt begonnen op te lopen (tabel 1). De grootste aantallen werden waargenomen tussen 5 en 10 oktober: liefst 64 exemplaren, nu grotendeels adult en voor zover zichtbaar afkomstig uit de Scandinavisch/Russische populatie. Het eerste deel van de invasie vond plaats tijdens relatief kalm weer, maar in de piekperiode was er sprake van aanhoudende westelijke stormen. Ook in andere landen rond de Noord- en Oostzee werden uitzonderlijke aantallen gezien: ca. 500 op de Britse Eilanden, ca. 500 in Denemarken, ca. 270 in Zweden, meer dan 150 in Noorwegen, 44 in West Duitsland, 18 in België. Alleen in Finland (20 stuks) was het waargenomen aantal normaal.

Over de oorzaak van de invasie bestaat geen enkele duidelijkheid. Omdat er geen sprake was van een abnormaal aantal doodvondsten lijkt het erop dat de betrokken vogels in een redelijke conditie verkeerden. De leeftijdsverdeling, overwegend volwassen vogels, wijst erop dat een eventueel buitengewoon gunstig broedsultaat slechts een ondergeschikte rol kan hebben gespeeld.

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